

THE  
KING'S THRESHOLD

BY  
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*PERSONS IN THE PLAY*

KING GUAIRE.

SEANCHAN (*pronounced* SHANAHAN).

HIS PUPILS.

THE MAYOR OF KINVARA.

TWO CRIPPLES.

BRIAN, *an old servant*.

THE LORD HIGH CHAMBERLAIN.

A SOLDIER.

A MONK.

COURT LADIES.

TWO PRINCESSES.

FEDELM.



## THE KING'S THRESHOLD

SCENE : *Steps before the Palace of KING  
GUAIRE at Gort. A table or litter in front  
of steps at one side, with food on it, and a  
bench. SEANCHAN lying on steps. PUPILS  
before steps. KING on the upper step before  
a curtained door.*

KING. I welcome you that have the mastery  
Of the two kinds of Music : the one kind  
Being like a woman, the other like a man.  
Both you that understand stringed instru-  
ments,  
And how to mingle words and notes together  
So artfully, that all the Art's but Speech  
Delighted with its own music ; and you that  
carry  
The long twisted horn, and understand  
The heady notes that, being without words,  
Can hurry beyond Time and Fate and  
Change.  
For the high angels that drive the horse of  
Time—  
The golden one by day, by night the silver—

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Are not more welcome to one that loves the  
world

For some fair woman's sake.

I have called you hither  
To save the life of your great master,  
Seanchan,

For all day long it has flamed up or flickered  
To the fast cooling hearth.

OLDEST PUPIL. When did he sicken ?  
Is it a fever that is wasting him ?

KING. No fever or sickness. He has  
chosen death :

Refusing to eat or drink, that he may bring  
Disgrace upon me ; for there is a custom,  
An old and foolish custom, that if a man  
Be wronged, or think that he is wronged, and  
starve

Upon another's threshold till he die,  
The common people, for all time to come,  
Will raise a heavy cry against that threshold,  
Even though it be the King's.

OLDEST PUPIL. My head whirls round ;  
I do not know what I am to think or say.  
I owe you all obedience, and yet  
How can I give it, when the man I have loved  
More than all others, thinks that he is wronged  
So bitterly, that he will starve and die  
Rather than bear it ? Is there any man  
Will throw his life away for a light issue ?

KING. It is but fitting that you take his side  
Until you understand how light an issue

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Has put us by the ears. Three days ago  
I yielded to the outcry of my courtiers—  
Bishops, Soldiers, and Makers of the Law—  
Who long had thought it against their dignity  
For a mere man of words to sit amongst them  
At the great council of the state and share  
In their authority. I bade him go,  
Though at the first with kind and courteous  
words,

But when he pleaded for the poets' right,  
Established at the establishment of the world,  
I said that I was King, and that all rights  
Had their original fountain in some king,  
And that it was the men who ruled the world,  
And not the men who sang to it, who should  
sit

Where there was the most honour. My  
courtiers—

Bishops, Soldiers, and Makers of the Law—  
Shouted approval ; and amid that noise  
Seanchan went out, and from that hour to this  
Although there is good food and drink  
beside him,

Has eaten nothing.

OLDEST PUPIL. I can breathe again.  
You have taken a great burden from my mind  
For that old custom's not worth dying for.

KING. Persuade him to eat or drink. Till  
yesterday  
I thought that hunger and weakness had been  
enough ;

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But finding them too trifling and too light  
To hold his mouth from biting at the grave,  
I called you hither, and all my hope's in you,  
And certain of his neighbours and good  
friends

That I have sent for. While he is lying there  
Perishing, my good name in the world  
Is perishing also. I cannot give way,  
Because I am King ; because if I gave way,  
My Nobles would call me a weakling, and it  
may be

The very throne be shaken.

OLDEST PUPIL. I will persuade him.  
Your words had been enough persuasion,  
King ;

But being lost in sleep or reverie,  
He cannot hear them.

KING. Make him eat or drink.  
Nor is it all because of my good name  
I'd have him do it, for he is a man  
That might well hit the fancy of a king,  
Banished out of his country, or a woman's  
Or any other's that can judge a man  
For what he is. But I that sit a throne,  
And take my measure from the needs of the  
State,  
Call his wild thought that overruns the  
measure,  
Making words more than deeds, and his  
proud will  
That would unsettle all, most mischievous,



## THE KING'S THRESHOLD 71

And he himself a most mischievous man.

*[He turns to go, and then returns again.]*

Promise a house with grass and tillage land,  
An annual payment, jewels and silken ware,  
Or anything but that old right of the poets.

*[He goes into palace.]*

OLDEST PUPIL. The King did wrong to  
abrogate our right ;

But Seanchan, who talks of dying for it,  
Talks foolishly. Look at us, Seanchan ;  
Waken out of your dream and look at us,  
Who have ridden under the moon and all the  
day,

Until the moon has all but come again,  
That we might be beside you.

SEANCHAN *[half turning round, leaning on  
his elbow, and speaking as if in a dream].*

I was but now

In Almhuin, in a great high-raftered house,  
With Finn and Osgar. Odours of roast flesh  
Rose round me, and I saw the roasting spits ;  
And then the dream was broken, and I saw  
Grania dividing salmon by a stream.

OLDEST PUPIL. Hunger has made you  
dream of roasting flesh ;

And though I all but weep to think of it,  
The hunger of the crane, that starves himself  
At the full moon because he is afraid  
Of his own shadow and the glittering water,  
Seems to me little more fantastical  
Than this of yours.

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SEANCHAN. Why, that's the very truth.  
It is as though the moon changed every-  
thing—

Myself and all that I can hear and see ;  
For when the heavy body has grown weak,  
There's nothing that can tether the wild mind  
That, being moonstruck and fantastical,  
Goes where it fancies. I have even thought  
I knew your voice and face, but now the  
words

Are so unlikely that I needs must ask  
Who is it that bids me put my hunger by.

OLDEST PUPIL. I am your oldest pupil,  
Seanchan ;  
The one that has been with you many years—  
So many, that you said at Candlemas  
That I had almost done with school, and  
knew

All but all that poets understand.

SEANCHAN. My oldest pupil ? No, that  
cannot be,  
For it is some one of the courtly crowds  
That have been round about me from sunrise,  
And I am tricked by dreams ; but I'll refute  
them.

At Candlemas I bid that pupil tell me  
Why poetry is honoured, wishing to know  
If he had any weighty argument  
For distant countries and strange, churlish  
kings.

What did he answer ?

## THE KING'S THRESHOLD 73

OLDEST PUPIL. I said the poets hung  
Images of the life that was in Eden  
About the child-bed of the world, that it,  
Looking upon those images, might bear  
Triumphant children. But why must I  
stand here,  
Repeating an old lesson, while you starve ?

SEANCHAN. Tell on, for I begin to know  
the voice.

What evil thing will come upon the world  
If the Arts perish ?

OLDEST PUPIL. If the Arts should perish,  
The world that lacked them would be like a  
woman,

That looking on the cloven lips of a hare,  
Brings forth a hare-lipped child.

SEANCHAN. But that's not all :  
For when I asked you how a man should guard  
Those images, you had an answer also,  
If you're the man that you have claimed to be,  
Comparing them to venerable things  
God gave to men before he gave them wheat.

OLDEST PUPIL. I answered—and the word  
was half your own—

That he should guard them as the Men of  
Dea

Guard their four treasures, as the Grail King  
guards

His holy cup, or the pale, righteous horse  
The jewel that is underneath his horn,  
Pouring out life for it as one pours out

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Sweet heady wine. . . . But now I understand ;

You would refute me out of my own mouth ;  
And yet a place at council, near the King,  
Is nothing of great moment, Seanchan.

How does so light a thing touch poetry ?

[SEANCHAN *is now sitting up. He still looks dreamily in front of him.*]

SEANCHAN. At Candlemas you called this poetry

One of the fragile, mighty things of God,  
That die at an insult.

OLDEST PUPIL [*to other PUPILS*]. Give me some true answer,

Upon that day he spoke about the Court  
And called it the first comely child of the world,

And said that all that was insulted there  
The world insulted, for the Courtly life  
Is the world's model. How shall I answer him ?

Can you not give me some true argument ?  
I will not tempt him with a lying one.

YOUNGEST PUPIL. O, tell him that the lovers of his music

Have need of him.

SEANCHAN.

But I am labouring  
For some that shall be born in the nick o' time,  
And find sweet nurture, that they may have voices,

## THE KING'S THRESHOLD 75

Even in anger, like the strings of harps ;  
And how could they be born to majesty  
If I had never made the golden cradle ?

YOUNGEST PUPIL [*throwing himself at SEANCHAN's feet*]. Why did you take me from  
my father's fields ?

If you would leave me now, what shall I love ?  
Where shall I go ? What shall I set my hand  
to ?

And why have you put music in my ears,  
If you would send me to the clattering houses?  
I will throw down the trumpet and the harp,  
For how could I sing verses or make music  
With none to praise me, and a broken heart ?

SEANCHAN. What was it that the poets  
promised you,

If it was not their sorrow ? Do not speak.  
Have I not opened school on these bare steps,  
And are not you the youngest of my scholars ?  
And I would have all know that when all falls  
In ruin, poetry calls out in joy,  
Being the scattering hand, the bursting pod,  
The victim's joy among the holy flame,  
God's laughter at the shattering of the world.  
And now that joy laughs out, and weeps and  
burns

On these bare steps.

YOUNGEST PUPIL. O master, do not die !

OLDEST PUPIL. Trouble him with no useless  
argument.

Be silent ! There is nothing we can do

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Except find out the King and kneel to him,  
And beg our ancient right.

For here are some  
To say whatever we could say and more,  
And fare as badly. Come, boy, that is no use.

[*Raises YOUNGEST PUPIL.*

If it seem well that we beseech the King,  
Lay down your harps and trumpets on the  
stones

In silence, and come with me silently.  
Come with slow footfalls, and bow all your  
heads,

For a bowed head becomes a mourner best.

[*They lay harps and trumpets down on  
by one, and then go out very solemnly  
and slowly, following one another.  
Enter MAYOR, TWO CRIPPLES, and  
BRIAN, an old servant. The MAYOR,  
who has been heard, before he came  
upon the stage, muttering 'Chief  
Poet,' 'Ireland,' etc., crosses in  
front of SEANCHAN to the other side  
of the steps. BRIAN takes food out of  
basket. The CRIPPLES are watching  
the basket. The MAYOR has an  
Ogham stick in his hand.*

MAYOR [*as he crosses*]. 'Chief Poet,' 'Ire-  
land,' 'Townsmen,' 'Grazing land.'

Those are the words I have to keep in mind—  
'Chief Poet,' 'Ireland,' 'Townsmen,'  
'Grazing land.'

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I have the words. They are all upon the  
Ogham.

'Chief Poet,' 'Ireland,' 'Townsmen,' 'Graz-  
ing land.'

But what's their order ?

*[He keeps muttering over his speech  
during what follows.]*

FIRST CRIPPLE. The King were rightly  
served

If Seanchan drove his good luck away.  
What's there about a king, that's in the world  
From birth to burial like another man,  
That he should change old customs, that  
were in it

As long as ever the world has been a world ?

SECOND CRIPPLE. If I were king I would  
not meddle with him,

For there is something queer about a poet.  
I knew of one that would be making rhyme  
Under a thorn at crossing of three roads.  
He was as ragged as ourselves, and yet  
He was no sooner dead than every thorn tree  
From Inchy to Kiltartan withered away.

FIRST CRIPPLE. The King is but a fool !

MAYOR. I am getting ready.

FIRST CRIPPLE. A poet has power from  
beyond the world,

That he may set our thoughts upon old times,  
And lucky queens and little holy fish  
That rise up every seventh year

MAYOR. Hush ! hush !

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FIRST CRIPPLE. To cure the crippled.

MAYOR. I am half ready now.

BRIAN. There's not a mischief I'd begrudge the King

If it were any other

MAYOR. Hush ! I am ready.

BRIAN. That died to get it. I have brought out the food,

And if my master will not eat of it,

I'll home and get provision for his wake,

For that's no great way off. Well, have your say,

But don't be long about it.

MAYOR [*goes close to SEANCHAN*]. Chief Poet of Ireland,

I am the Mayor of your own town Kinvara,

And I am come to tell you that the news

Of this great trouble with the King of Gort

Has plunged us in deep sorrow—part for you,

Our honoured townsman, part for our good town.

[*Begins to hesitate ; scratching his head.*]

But what comes now ? Something about the King.

BRIAN. Get on ! get on ! The food is all set out.

MAYOR. Don't hurry me.

FIRST CRIPPLE. Give us a taste of it.

He'll not begrudge it.

SECOND CRIPPLE. Let them that have their limbs



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Starve if they will. We have to keep in mind  
The stomach God has left us.

MAYOR. Hush ! I have it !  
The King was said to be most friendly to us,  
And we have reason, as you'll recollect,  
For thinking that he was about to give  
Those grazing lands inland we so much need,  
Being pinched between the water and the  
stones.

Our mowers mow with knives between the  
stones ;

The sea washes the meadows. You know well  
We have asked nothing but what's reasonable.

SEANCHAN. Reason in plenty. Yellowy  
white hair,  
A hollow face, and not too many teeth.  
How comes it he has been so long in the  
world

And not found Reason out ?

*[While saying this he has turned half  
round. He hardly looks at the*

MAYOR.

BRIAN *[trying to pull MAYOR away]*. What  
good is there

In telling him what he has heard all day !  
I will set food before him.

MAYOR *[shoving BRIAN away]*. Don't hurry  
me !

It's small respect you're showing to the town !  
Get farther off ! *[to SEANCHAN]*. We would  
not have you think,

## o THE KING'S THRESHOLD

Weighty as these considerations are,  
That they have been as weighty in our minds  
As our desire that one we take much pride in,  
A man that's been an honour to our town,  
Should live and prosper ; therefore we be-  
sech you

To give way in a matter of no moment,  
A matter of mere sentiment—a trifle—  
That we may always keep our pride in you.

*[He finishes this speech with a pompous  
air, motions to BRIAN to bring the  
food to SEANCHAN, and sits on seat.]*

BRIAN. Master, Master, eat this ! It's  
not king's food,

That's cooked for everybody and nobody.  
Here's barley-bread out of your father's oven,  
And dulse from Duras. Here is the dulse,  
your honour ;

It's wholesome, and has the good taste of the  
sea.

*[Takes dulse in one hand and bread in  
other and presses them into SEAN-  
CHAN's hands. SEANCHAN shows by  
his movement his different feeling to  
BRIAN.]*

FIRST CRIPPLE. He has taken it, and there'll  
be nothing left !

SECOND CRIPPLE. Nothing at all, he wanted  
his own sort.

What's honey to a cat, corn to a dog,  
Or a green apple to a ghost in a churchyard ?

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SEANCHAN [*pressing food back into BRIAN's hands*]. Eat it yourself, for you have come a journey,

And it may be ate nothing on the way.

BRIAN. How could I eat it, and your honour starving !

It is your father sends it, and he cried  
Because the stiffness that is in his bones  
Prevented him from coming, and bade me  
tell you

That he is old, that he has need of you,  
And that the people will be pointing at him,  
And he not able to lift up his head,  
If you should turn the King's favour away ;  
And he adds to it, that he cared you well,  
And you in your young age, and that it's  
right

That you should care him now.

SEANCHAN [*who is now interested*]. And is that all ?

What did my mother say !

BRIAN. She gave no message ;  
For when they told her you had it in mind to  
starve,

Or get again the ancient right of the poets,  
She said : ' No message can do any good.  
He will not send the answer that you want.  
We cannot change him.' And she went  
indoors,

Lay down upon the bed, and turned her face  
Out of the light. And thereupon your father

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Said : ' Tell him that his mother sends no  
message,  
Albeit broken down and miserable.'

[*A pause.*  
Here's pigeon's eggs from Duras, and these  
others  
Were laid by your own hens.

SEANCHAN. She has sent no message.  
Our mothers know us ; they know us to the  
bone.

They knew us before birth, and that is why  
They know us even better than the sweet-  
hearts

Upon whose breasts we have lain.

Go quickly ! Go  
And tell them that my mother is in the  
right.

There is no answer. Go and tell them that.  
Go tell them that she knew me.

MAYOR. What is he saying ?  
I never understood a poet's talk  
More than the baa of a sheep !

[*Comes over from seat.* SEANCHAN  
*turns away.*

You have not heard,  
It may be, having been so much away,  
How many of the cattle died last winter  
From lacking grass, and that there was much  
sickness

Because the poor have nothing but salt fish  
To live on through the winter ?

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BRIAN.                                 Get away,  
And leave the place to me !      It's my turn  
now,  
For your sack's empty !

MAYOR. Is it 'get away' !  
Is that the way I'm to be spoken to !  
Am I not Mayor ? Amn't I authority ?  
Amn't I in the King's place ? Answer me  
that !

BRIAN. Then show the people what a king  
is like :  
Pull down old merings and root custom up,  
Whitewash the dunghills, fatten hogs and  
geese,  
Hang your gold chain about an ass's neck,  
And burn the blessed thorn trees out of the  
fields,  
And drive what's comely away !

MAYOR. Holy Saint Coleman !

FIRST CRIPPLE. Fine talk ! fine talk !

## What else does the King do ?

He fattens hogs and hunts the wise man out.

SECOND CRIPPLE. He fattens geese.

FIRST CRIPPLE. And drives away the swan.

MAYOR. How dare you take his name into your mouth !

How dare you lift your voice against the King !

What would we be without him ?

BRIAN. Why do you praise him?  
I will have nobody speak well of him,

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Or any other king that robs my master.

MAYOR. And had he not the right to ? and  
the right

To strike your master's head off, being the  
King,

Or yours or mine ? I say, ' Long live the  
King !

Because he does not take our heads from us.'

Call out, ' Long life to him ! '

BRIAN. Call out for him !

*[Speaking at same time with MAYOR.]*

There's nobody 'll call out for him,

But smiths will turn their anvils,

The millers turn their wheels,

The farmers turn their churns,

The witches turn their thumbs,

Till he be broken and splintered into pieces.

MAYOR *[at same time with BRIAN]*. He  
might, if he'd a mind to it,

Be digging out our tongues,

Or dragging out our hair,

Or bleaching us like calves,

Or weaning us like lambs,

But for the kindness and the softness that is  
in him. *[They gasp for breath.]*

FIRST CRIPPLE. I'll curse him till I drop !

*[Speaking at same time as SECOND  
CRIPPLE and MAYOR and BRIAN,  
who have begun again.]*

The curse of the poor be upon him,

The curse of the widows upon him,

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The curse of the children upon him,  
The curse of the bishops upon him,  
Until he be as rotten as an old mushroom !

SECOND CRIPPLE [*speaking at same time as*

FIRST CRIPPLE *and* MAYOR *and* BRIAN].

The curse of wrinkles be upon him !  
Wrinkles where his eyes are,  
Wrinkles where his nose is,  
Wrinkles where his mouth is,  
And a little old devil looking out of every  
wrinkle !

BRIAN [*speaking at same time with* MAYOR  
*and* CRIPPLES]. And nobody will sing  
for him,

And nobody will hunt for him,  
And nobody will fish for him,  
And nobody will pray for him,  
But ever and always curse him and abuse him.

MAYOR [*speaking at same time with* CRIPPLES  
*and* BRIAN]. What good is in a poet ?

Has he money in a stocking,  
Or cider in the cellar,  
Or flitches in the chimney,  
Or anything anywhere but his own idleness ?

[BRIAN *seizes* MAYOR.]

Help ! help ! Am I not in authority ?

BRIAN. That's how I'll shout for the King !

MAYOR. Help ! help ! Am I not in the  
King's place ?

BRIAN. I'll teach him to be kind to the  
poor !

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MAYOR. Help ! help ! Wait till we are in Kinvara !

FIRST CRIPPLE [*beating MAYOR on the legs with crutch*]. I'll shake the royalty out of his legs !

SECOND CRIPPLE [*burying his nails in MAYOR's face*]. I'll scumble the ermine out of his skin !

[*The CHAMBERLAIN comes down steps shouting, "Silence ! silence ! silence !"*]

CHAMBERLAIN. How dare you make this uproar at the doors.

Deafening the very greatest in the land,  
As if the farmyards and the rookeries  
Had all been emptied !

FIRST CRIPPLE. It is the Chamberlain.  
[*CRIPPLES go out.*]

CHAMBERLAIN. Pick up the litter there,  
and get you gone !

Be quick about it ! Have you no respect  
For this worn stair, this all but sacred door,  
Where suppliants and tributary kings  
Have passed, and the world's glory knelt in  
silence ?

Have you no reverence for what all other  
men

Hold honourable ?

BRIAN. If I might speak my mind,  
I'd say the King would have his luck again  
If he would let my master have his rights.



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CHAMBERLAIN. Pick up your litter ! Take  
your noise away !  
Make haste, and get the clapper from the  
bell !

BRIAN [*putting last of food into basket*].  
What do the great and powerful care for  
rights  
That have no armies !

[CHAMBERLAIN *begins shoving them out  
with his staff.*

MAYOR. My lord, I am not to blame.  
I'm the King's man, and they attacked me  
for it.

BRIAN. We have our prayers, our curses  
and our prayers,  
And we can give a great name or a bad  
one.

[MAYOR *is shoving BRIAN out before him  
with one hand. He keeps his face  
to CHAMBERLAIN, and keeps bowing.  
The CHAMBERLAIN shoves him with  
his staff.*

MAYOR. We could not make the poet eat,  
my lord.

[CHAMBERLAIN *shoves him with his staff.*  
Much honoured [*is shoved again*]  
—honoured  
to speak with you, my lord ;  
But I'll go find the girl that he's to marry.  
She's coming, but I'll hurry her, my lord.  
Between ourselves, my lord [*is shoved again*],  
she is a great coaxer.

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Much honoured, my lord. Oh, she's the  
 girl to do it ;  
 For when the intellect is out, my lord,  
 Nobody but a woman's any good.

[*Is shoved again.*  
 Much honoured, my lord [*is shoved again*],  
 much honoured, much honoured !

[*Is shoved out, shoving BRIAN out before him*  
*[All through this scene, from the outset of*  
*the quarrel, SEANCHAN has kept his*  
*face turned away, or hidden in his*  
*cloak. While the CHAMBERLAIN has*  
*been speaking, the SOLDIER and the*  
*MONK have come out of the palace.*  
*The MONK stands on top of steps at*  
*one side, SOLDIER a little down steps*  
*at the other side. COURT LADIES are*  
*seen at opening in the palace curtain*  
*behind SOLDIER. CHAMBERLAIN is*  
*in the centre.*

CHAMBERLAIN [*to SEANCHAN*]. Well, you  
 must be contented, for your work  
 Has roused the commonsort against the King,  
 And stolen his authority. The State  
 Is like some orderly and reverend house,  
 Wherein the master, being dead of a sudden,  
 The servants quarrel where they have a mind  
 to,  
 And pilfer here and there.

[*Pause, finding that SEANCHAN does not*  
*answer.*

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How many days

Will you keep up this quarrel with the King,  
And the King's nobles, and myself, and all,  
Who'd gladly be your friends, if you would  
let them? [Going near to MONK.

If you would try, you might persuade him,  
father.

I cannot make him answer me, and yet  
If fitting hands would offer him the food,  
He might accept it.

MONK.

Certainly I will not.

I've made too many homilies, wherein  
The wanton imagination of the poets  
Has been condemned, to be his flatterer.  
If pride and disobedience are unpunished  
Who will obey?

CHAMBERLAIN [*going to other side towards*  
SOLDIER]. If you would speak to him,

You might not find persuasion difficult,  
With all the devils of hunger helping you.

SOLDIER. I will not interfere, and if he  
starve

For being obstinate and stiff in the neck,  
'Tis but good riddance.

CHAMBERLAIN.

One of us must do it.

It might be, if you'd reason with him, ladies,  
He would eat something, for I have a notion  
That if he brought misfortune on the King,  
Or the King's house, we'd be as little thought  
of

As summer linen when the winter's come.

90 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

FIRST GIRL. But it would be the greater  
compliment  
If Peter 'd do it.

SECOND GIRL. Reason with him, Peter.  
Persuade him to eat ; he's such a bag of  
bones !

SOLDIER. I'll never trust a woman's word  
again !  
There's nobody that was so loud against him  
When he was at the council ; now the wind's  
changed,  
And you that could not bear his speech or his  
silence,

Would have him there in his old place again ;  
I do believe you would, but I won't help you.

SECOND GIRL. Why will you be so hard  
upon us, Peter ?  
You know we have turned the common sort  
against us.

And he looks miserable.

FIRST GIRL. We cannot dance,  
Because no harper will pluck a string for us.

SECOND GIRL. I cannot sleep with think-  
ing of his face.

FIRST GIRL. And I love dancing more than  
anything.

SECOND GIRL. Do not be hard on us ; but  
yesterday

A woman in the road threw stones at me.  
You would not have me stoned ?

FIRST GIRL. May I not dance ?

THE KING'S THRESHOLD 91

SOLDIER. I will do nothing. You have  
put him out,  
And now that he is out—well, leave him out.

FIRST GIRL. Do it for my sake, Peter.

SECOND GIRL. And for mine.

*[Each girl as she speaks takes PETER'S  
hand with her right hand, stroking  
down his arm with her left. While*

*SECOND GIRL is stroking his arm,*

*FIRST GIRL leaves go and gives him  
the dish.*

SOLDIER. Well, well; but not your way.

*[To SEANCHAN.]* Here's meat for you.

It has been carried from too good a table  
For men like you, and I am offering it  
Because these women have made a fool of me.

*[A pause.]*

You mean to starve? You will have none of  
it?

I'll leave it there, where you can sniff the  
savour.

Snuff it, old hedgehog, and unroll yourself!  
But if I were the King, I'd make you do it  
With wisps of lighted straw.

SEANCHAN. You have rightly named me.  
I lie rolled up under the ragged thorns  
That are upon the edge of those great waters  
Where all things vanish away, and I have  
heard

Murmurs that are the ending of all sound.  
I am out of life; I am rolled up, and yet,

92 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

Hedgehog although I am, I'll not unroll  
For you, King's dog ! Go to the King,  
your master.

Crouch down and wag your tail, for it may be  
He has nothing now against you, and I think  
The stripes of your last beating are all healed.

[*The SOLDIER has drawn his sword.*

C A BERLAIN [*striking up sword*]. Put up  
your sword, sir ; put it up, I say !  
The common sort would tear you into pieces  
If you but touched him.

SOLDIE . If he's to be flattered,  
Petted, cajoled, and dandled into humour,  
We might as well have left him at the table.

[*Goes to one side sheathing sword.*

SEANC AN. You must need keep your  
patie ce yet awhile,  
For I have some few mouthfuls of sweet air  
To swallow before I have grown to be as civil  
As any other dust.

C A BERLAIN. You wrong us, Seanchan.  
There is none here but holds you in respect ;  
And if you'd only eat out of this dish,  
The King would show how much he honours  
you.

[*Bowing and smiling.*

Who could imagine you'd so take to heart  
Bei g drive from the council ? I am certain  
That you, if you will only think it over,  
Will understand that it is men of law,  
Leaders of the King's armies, and the like,

## THE KING'S THRESHOLD 93

That should sit there.

SEANCHAN. Somebody has deceived you,  
Or maybe it was your own eyes that lied,  
In making it appear that I was driven  
From the great council. You have driven  
away

The images of them that weave a dance  
By the four rivers in the mountain garden.

CHAMBERLAIN. You mean we have driven  
poetry away.

But that's not altogether true, for I,  
As you should know, have written poetry.  
And often when the table has been cleared,  
And candles lighted, the King calls for me,  
And I repeat it him. My poetry  
Is not to be compared with yours ; but still,  
Where I am honoured, poetry is honoured—  
In some measure.

SEANCHAN. If you are a poet,  
Cry out that the King's money would not  
buy,  
Nor the high circle consecrate his head,  
If poets had never christened gold, and even  
The moon's poor daughter, that most whey-  
faced metal,  
Precious ; and cry out that none alive  
Would ride among the arrows with high heart,  
Or scatter with an open hand, had not  
Our heady craft commended wasteful virtues.  
And when that story's finished, shake your  
coat

94 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

Where little jewels gleam on it, and say,  
A herdsman, sitting where the pigs had  
trampled,

Made up a song about enchanted kings,  
Who were so finely dressed, one fancied them  
All fiery, and women by the churn  
And children by the hearth caught up the  
song

And murmured it, until the tailors heard it.

CHAMBERLAIN. If you would but eat some-  
thing you'd find out.

That you have had these thoughts from lack  
of food,

For hunger makes us feverish.

SEANCHAN.

Cry aloud,

That when we are driven out we come again  
Like a great wind that runs out of the  
waste

To blow the tables flat ; and thereupon  
Lie down upon the threshold till the King  
Restore to us the ancient right of the poets.

MONK. You cannot shake him. I will to  
the King,

And offer him consolation in his trouble,  
For that man there has set his teeth to die.  
And being one that hates obedience,  
Discipline, and orderliness of life,  
I cannot mourn him.

FIRST GIRL. 'Twas you that stirred it up.  
You stirred it up that you might spoil our  
dancing.



## THE KING'S THRESHOLD 95

Why shouldn't we have dancing? We're  
not in Lent.

Yet nobody will pipe or play to us ;  
And they will never do it if he die.  
And that is why you are going.

MONK. What folly's this ?

FIRST GIRL. Well, if you did not do it, speak  
to him—

Use your authority ; make him obey you.  
What harm is there in dancing ?

MONK. Hush ! begone !

Go to the fields and watch the hurley players,  
Or any other place you have a mind to.  
This is not woman's work.

FIRST GIRL. Come ! let's away !

We can do nothing here.

MONK. The pride of the poets !

Dancing, hurling, the country full of noise,  
And King and Church neglected. Seanchan,  
I'll take my leave, for you are perishing  
Like all that let the wanton imagination  
Carry them where it will, and it's not likely  
I'll look upon your living face again.

SEANCHAN. Come nearer, nearer !

MONK. Have you some last wish ?

SEANCHAN. Stoop down, for I would  
whisper it in your ear.

Has that wild God of yours, that was so wild  
When you'd but lately taken the King's pay,  
Grown any tamer ? He gave you all much  
trouble.

## 96 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

MONK. Let go my habit !

SEANCHAN. Have you persuaded him  
To chirp between two dishes when the King  
Sits down to table ?

MONK. Let go my habit, sir !  
[Crosses to centre of stage.

SEANCHAN. And maybe he has learned to  
sing quite softly  
Because loud singing would disturb the King,  
Who is sitting drowsily among his friends  
After the table has been cleared. Not yet !

[SEANCHAN *has been dragged some feet  
clinging to the MONK's habit.*

You did not think that hands so full of  
hunger  
Could hold you tightly. They are not civil  
yet.

I'd know if you have taught him to eat bread  
From the King's hand, and perch upon his  
finger.

I think he perches on the King's strong hand.  
But it may be that he is still too wild.

You must not weary in your work ; a king  
Is often weary, and he needs a God  
To be a comfort to him.

[*The MONK plucks his habit away and  
goes into palace. SEANCHAN holds  
up his hand as if a bird perched upon  
it. He pretends to stroke the bird.*

A little God,  
With comfortable feathers, and bright eyes.

## THE KING'S THRESHOLD 97

FIRST GIRL. There will be no more dancing  
in our time,  
For nobody will play the harp or the fiddle.  
Let us away, for we cannot amend it,  
And watch the hurley.

SECOND GIRL. Hush ! he is looking at us.

SEANCHAN. Yes, yes, go to the hurley, go  
to the hurley,  
Go to the hurley ! Gather up your skirts—  
Run quickly ! You can remember many  
love songs ;  
I know it by the light that's in your eyes—  
But you'll forget them. You're fair to look  
upon.  
Your feet delight in dancing, and your  
mouths  
In the slow smiling that awakens love.  
The mothers that have borne you mated  
rightly.  
They'd little ears as thirsty as your ears  
For many love songs. Go to the young men.  
Are not the ruddy flesh and the thin flanks  
And the broad shoulders worthy of desire ?  
Go from me ! Here is nothing for your eyes.  
But it is I that am singing you away—  
Singing you to the young men.

[*The TWO YOUNG PRINCESSES come out  
of palace. While he has been speak-  
ing the GIRLS have shrunk back hold-  
ing each other's hands.*

FIRST GIRL.

Be quiet !

98 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

Look who it is has come out of the house.  
Princesses, we are for the hurling field.  
Will you go there ?

FIRST PRINCESS. We will go with you,  
Aileen.

But we must have some words with Seanchan,  
For we have come to make him eat and drink.

CHAMBERLAIN. I will hold out the dish and  
cup for him

While you are speaking to him of his folly,  
If you desire it, Princess.

*[He has taken dish and cup.]*

FIRST PRINCESS. No, Finula  
Will carry him the dish and I the cup.  
We'll offer them ourselves.

*[They take cup and dish.]*

FIRST GIRL. They are so gracious ;  
The dear little Princesses are so gracious.

*[PRINCESS holds out her hand for  
SEANCHAN to kiss it. He does not  
move.]*

Although she is holding out her hand to him,  
He will not kiss it.

FIRST PRINCESS. My father bids us say  
That, though he cannot have you at his table,  
You may ask any other thing you like  
And he will give it you. We carry you  
With our own hands a dish and cup of  
wine.

FIRST GIRL. Oh, look ! he has taken it !  
He has taken it !

## THE KING'S THRESHOLD 99

The dear Princesses ! I have always said  
That nobody could refuse them anything.

[SEANCHAN *takes the cup in one hand.*  
*In the other he holds for a moment*  
*the hand of the PRINCESS.*

SEANCHAN. Oh long, soft fingers and pale  
finger-tips,  
Well worthy to be laid in a king's hand !  
Oh, you have fair white hands, for it is certain  
There is uncommon whiteness in these hands.  
But there is something comes into my mind,  
Princess. A little while before your birth,  
I saw your mother sitting by the road  
In a high chair ; and when a leper passed,  
She pointed him the way into the town.  
He lifted up his hand and blessed her hand—  
I saw it with my own eyes. Hold out your  
hands ;  
I will find out if they are contaminated,  
For it has come into my thoughts that maybe  
The King has sent me food and drink by  
hands  
That are contaminated. I would see all your  
hands.  
You've eyes of dancers ; but hold out your  
hands,  
For it may be there are none sound among  
you.

[*The PRINCESSES have shrunk back in terror*  
FIRST PRINCESS. He has called us lepers.  
[*SOLDIER draws sword.*

100 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

CHAMBERLAIN. He's out of his mind,  
And does not know the meaning of what he  
said.

SEANCHAN [*standing up*]. There's no sound  
hand among you—no sound hand.  
Away with you ! away with all of you !  
You are all lepers ! There is leprosy  
Among the plates and dishes that you have  
carried.  
And wherefore have you brought me leper's  
wine ?

[*He flings the contents of the cup in their faces.*  
There, there ! I have given it to you again.  
And now

Begone, or I will give my curse to you.  
You have the leper's blessing, but you think  
Maybe the bread will something lack in  
savour

Unless you mix my curse into the dough.

[*They go out hurriedly in all directions.*  
SEANCHAN is staggering in the middle  
of the stage.

Where did I say the leprosy had come from ?  
I said it came out of a leper's hand,

[*Enter CRIPPLES.*  
And that he walked the highway. But that's  
folly,

For he was walking up there in the sky.  
And there he is even now, with his white hand  
Thrust out of the blue air, and blessing them  
With leprosy.

## THE KING'S THRESHOLD 101

FIRST CRIPPLE. He's pointing at the moon  
That's coming out up yonder, and he calls  
it

Leprous, because the daylight whitens it.

SEANCHAN. He's holding up his hand  
above them all—

King, noblemen, princesses—blessing all.

Who could imagine he'd have so much  
patience?

FIRST CRIPPLE [*clutching the other CRIPPLE*].  
Come out of this!

SECOND CRIPPLE [*pointing to food*]. If you  
don't need it, sir,

May we not carry some of it away?

[*They cross towards food and pass in  
front of SEANCHAN.*]

SEANCHAN. Who's speaking? Who are  
you?

FIRST CRIPPLE. Come out of this!

SECOND CRIPPLE. Have pity on us, that  
must beg our bread

From table to table throughout the entire  
world,

And yet be hungry.

SEANCHAN. But why were you born  
crooked?

What bad poet did your mothers listen to  
That you were born so crooked?

CRIPPLE. Come away!

Maybe he's cursed the food, and it might kill  
us.

102 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

OTHER CRIPPLE. Yes, better come away.

*[They go out]*

SEANCHAN *[staggering, and speaking wearily]*.

He has great strength  
And great patience to hold his right hand  
there,

Uplifted, and not wavering about.

He is much stronger than I am, much  
stronger.

*[Sinks down on steps. MAYOR and  
FEDELM have entered.]*

MAYOR. He is delirious now.

FEDELM.

Before I speak  
Of food or drink I'll take him out of this.  
For while he is on this threshold and can hear,  
It may be, the voices that made mock of him,  
He would not listen.

MAYOR. No, speak to him at once.  
Press food upon him while delirious  
And he may eat not knowing what he does.

*[MAYOR goes out.]*

FEDELM. Seanchan ! Seanchan !

*[He remains looking into the sky.]*

Can you not hear me, Seanchan ?  
It is myself.

*[He looks at her, dreamily at first, then  
takes her hand.]*

SEANCHAN. Is this your hand, Fedelm ?  
I have been looking at another hand  
That is up yonder.

FEDELM.

I have come for you.



## THE KING'S THRESHOLD 103

SEANCHAN. Fedelm, I did not know that you were here.

FEDELM. And can you not remember that I promised

That I would come and take you home with me

When I'd the harvest in? And now I've come,

And you must come away, and come on the instant.

SEANCHAN. Yes, I will come. But is the harvest in?

This air has got a summer taste in it.

FEDELM. But is not the wild middle of the summer

A better time to marry? Come with me now!

SEANCHAN [*seizing her by both wrists*]. Who taught you that? For it's a certainty,

Although I never knew it till last night,  
That marriage, because it is the height of life,  
Can only be accomplished to the full

In the high days of the year. I lay awake :  
There had come a frenzy into the light of the stars,

And they were coming nearer, and I knew  
All in a minute they were about to marry  
Clods out upon the ploughlands, to beget  
A mightier race than any that has been.  
But some that are within there made a noise,  
And frightened them away.

104 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

FEDELM. Come with me now !  
We have far to go, and daylight's running  
out.

SEANCHAN. The stars had come so near  
me that I caught  
Their singing. It was praise of that great  
race  
That would be haughty, mirthful, and white-  
bodied,  
With a high head, and open hand, and how,  
Laughing, it would take the mastery of the  
world.

FEDELM. But you will tell me all about  
their songs  
When we're at home. You have need of  
rest and care,  
And I can give them you when we're at home.  
And therefore let us hurry, and get us home.

SEANCHAN. It's certain that there is some  
trouble here,  
Although it's gone out of my memory.  
And I would get away from it. Give me  
your help. [*Trying to rise.*]

But why are not my pupils here to help me ?  
Go, call my pupils, for I need their help.

FEDELM. Come with me now, and I will  
send for them,  
For I have a great room that's full of beds  
I can make ready ; and there is a smooth lawn  
Where they can play at hurley and sing poems  
Under an apple-tree.

## THE KING'S THRESHOLD 105

SEANCHAN. I know that place :  
An apple-tree, and a smooth level lawn  
Where the young men can sway their hurley  
sticks.

[*Sings.*]

The four rivers that run there,  
Through well-mown level ground,  
Have come out of a blessed well  
That is all bound and wound  
By the great roots of an apple,  
And all the fowl of the air  
Have gathered in the wide branches  
And keep singing there.

[FEDELM, *troubled, has covered her eyes  
with her hands.*]

FEDELM. No, there are not four rivers, and  
those rhymes  
Praise Adam's paradise.

SEANCHAN. I can remember now,  
It's out of a poem I made long ago  
About the Garden in the East of the World,  
And how spirits in the images of birds  
Crowd in the branches of old Adam's crab-  
tree.

They come before me now, and dig in the fruit  
With so much gluttony, and are so drunk  
With that harsh wholesome savour, that their  
feathers

Are clinging one to another with the juice.  
But you would lead me to some friendly place,  
And I would go there quickly.

106 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

FEDELM [*helping him to rise*]. Come with me.

[*He walks slowly, supported by her, till he comes to table.*]

SEANCHAN. But why am I so weak? Have I been ill?

Sweetheart, why is it that I am so weak?

[*Sinks on to seat.*]

FEDELM [*goes to table*]. I'll dip this piece of bread into the wine,

For that will make you stronger for the journey.

SEANCHAN. Yes, give me bread and wine; that's what I want,

For it is hunger that is gnawing me.

[*He takes bread from FEDELM, hesitates, and then thrusts it back into her hand.*]

But, no; I must not eat it.

FEDELM.

Eat, Seanchan.

For if you do not eat it you will die.

SEANCHAN. Why did you give me food?

Why did you come?

For had I not enough to fight against

Without your coming?

FEDELM.

Eat this little crust,

Seanchan, if you have any love for me.

SEANCHAN. I must not eat it—but that's beyond your wit.

Child! child! I must not eat it, though I die.

FEDELM [*passionately*]. You do not know what love is; for if you loved,

You would put every other thought away.

THE KING'S THRESHOLD 107

But you have never loved me.

SEANCHAN [*seizing her by wrist*]. You, a child,

Who have but seen a man out of the window,  
Tell me that I know nothing about love,  
And that I do not love you? Did I not say  
There was a frenzy in the light of the stars  
All through the livelong night, and that the  
night

Was full of marriages? But that fight's over  
And all that's done with, and I have to die.

FEDELM [*throwing her arms about him*]. I  
will not be put from you, although I  
think

I had not grudged it you if some great lady,  
If the King's daughter, had set out your bed.  
I will not give you up to death; no, no!  
And are not these white arms and this soft  
neck

Better than the brown earth?

SEANCHAN [*struggling to disengage himself*].  
Begone from me!

There's treachery in those arms and in that  
voice.

They're all against me. Why do you linger  
there?

How long must I endure the sight of you?

FEDELM. O, Seanchan! Seanchan!

SEANCHAN [*rising*]. Go where you will,  
So it be out of sight and out of mind.  
I cast you from me like an old torn cap,

108 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

A broken shoe, a glove without a finger,  
A crooked penny ; whatever is most worth-  
less.

FEDELM [*bursts into tears*]. Oh, do not  
drive me from you !

SEANCHAN [*takes her in his arms*]. What  
did I say,

My dove of the woods ? I was about to  
curse you.

It was a frenzy. I'll unsay it all.

But you must go away.

FEDELM. Let me be near you.

I will obey like any married wife.

Let me but lie before your feet.

SEANCHAN. Come nearer. [*Kisses her*.

If I had eaten when you bid me, sweetheart,  
The kiss of multitudes in times to come  
Had been the poorer.

[*Enter KING from palace, followed by  
the two PRINCESSES.*

KING [*to FEDELM*]. Has he eaten yet ?

FEDELM. No, King, and will not till you  
have restored

The right of the poets.

KING [*coming down and standing before*

SEANCHAN]. Seanchan, you have refused

Everybody I have sent, and now

I come to you myself.

FEDELM. Come nearer, King,

He is now so weak he cannot hear your voice.

KING. Seanchan, put away your pride as I

THE KING'S THRESHOLD 109

Have put my pride away. I had your love  
Not a great while ago, and now you have  
planned

To put a voice by every cottage fire,  
And in the night when no one sees who cries,  
To cry against me till my throne has  
crumbled.

And yet if I give way I must offend  
My courtiers and nobles till they, too,  
Strike at the crown. What would you have  
of me ?

SEANCHAN. When did the poets promise  
safety, King ?

KING. Seanchan, I bring you bread in my  
own hands,  
And bid you eat because of all these reasons,  
And for this further reason, that I love you.

[SEANCHAN *pushes bread away, with*  
FEDELM'S *hand.*

You have refused, Seanchan ?

SEANCHAN. We have refused it.

KING. I have been patient, though I am a  
king,  
And have the means to force you. But that's  
ended,

And I am but a king, and you a subject.  
Nobles and courtiers, bring the poets hither ;

[*Enter COURT LADIES, MONK, SOLDIERS,*  
CHAMBERLAIN, *and COURTIERS with*  
PUPILS, *who have halters round their*  
*necks.*

110 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

For you can have your way. I that was  
man,

With a man's heart, am now all king again,  
Speak to your master ; beg your life of him ;  
Show him the halter that is round your necks.  
If his heart's set upon it, he may die ;  
But you shall all die with him.

*[Goes up steps.*

*Beg your lives !*

Begin, for you have little time to lose.

Begin it, you that are the oldest pupil.

OLDEST PUPIL. Die, Seanchan, and pro-  
claim the right of the poets.

KING. Silence ! you are as crazy as your  
master.

But that young boy, that seems the youngest  
of you

I'd have him speak. Kneel down before him,  
boy ;

Hold up your hands to him that you may  
pluck

That milky-coloured neck out of the noose.

YOUNGEST PUPIL. Die, Seanchan, and pro-  
claim the right of the poets.

SEANCHAN. Come nearer me that I may  
know how face

Differs from face and touch you with my  
hands.

O more than kin, O more than children could  
be,

For children are but born out of our blood



## THE KING'S THRESHOLD 111

And share our frailty. O my chicks, my chicks !

That I have nourished underneath my wings  
And fed upon my soul.

*[He rises and walks down steps.*

I need no help.

He needs no help that joy has lifted up  
Like some miraculous beast out of Ezekiel.  
The man that dies has the chief part in the  
story,

And I will mock and mock that image yonder,  
That evil picture in the sky—no, no !

I have all my strength again, I will outface it.  
O look upon the moon that's standing there  
In the blue daylight—take note of the complexion

Because it is the white of leprosy  
And the contagion that afflicts mankind  
Falls from the moon. When I and these are  
dead

We should be carried to some windy hill  
To lie there with uncovered face awhile  
That mankind and that leper there may know  
Dead faces laugh.

*[He falls and then half rises.*

King ! King ! Dead faces laugh.

*[He dies.*

OLDEST PUPIL. King, he is dead ; some  
strange triumphant thought  
So filled his heart with joy that it has burst,  
Being grown too mighty for our frailty,

112 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

And we who gaze grow like him and abhor  
The moments that come between us and that  
death

You promised us.

KING.

Take up his body.

Go where you please and lay it where you  
please,

So that I cannot see his face or any  
That cried him towards his death.

YOUNGEST PUPIL.

Dead faces laugh !

The ancient right is gone, the new remains  
And that is death.

*[They go towards the King holding out  
their halters.]*

We are impatient men,

So gather up the halters in your hands.

KING. Drive them away.

*[He goes into the palace. The SOLDIERS  
block the way before the PUPILS.]*

SOLDIER.

Here is no place for you.

For he and his pretensions now are finished.

Begone before the men-at-arms are bidden

To beat you from the door.

OLDEST PUPIL.

Take up his body

And cry that driven from the populous  
door

He seeks high waters and the mountain birds  
To claim a portion of their solitude.

*[They make a litter with cloak and  
staffs or use one discovered, heaped  
with food, at the opening of the play.]*

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YOUNGEST PUPIL. And cry that when they  
took his ancient right

They took all common sleep ; therefore he  
claims

The mountain for his mattress and his pillow.

OLDEST PUPIL. And there he can sleep on,  
not noticing,

Although the world be changed from worse  
to worse,

Amid the changeless clamour of the curlew.

*[They raise the litter on their shoulders  
and move a few steps.]*

YOUNGEST PUPIL *[motioning to them to stop]*.

Yet make triumphant music ; sing aloud  
For coming times will bless what he has  
blessed

And curse what he has cursed.

OLDEST PUPIL.

No, no, be still,

Or pluck a solemn music from the strings

You wrong his greatness speaking so of  
triumph.

YOUNGEST PUPIL. O silver trumpets, be  
you lifted up

And cry to the great race that is to come.

Long-throated swans upon the waves of time,

Sing loudly for beyond the wall of the world

That race may hear our music and awake.

OLDEST PUPIL *[motioning the musicians to  
lower their trumpets]*. Not what it leaves

behind it in the light

But what it carries with it to the dark

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Exalts the soul ; nor song nor trumpet blast  
Can call up races from the worsening world  
To mend the wrong and mar the solitude  
Of the great shade we follow to the tomb.

[FEDELM *and the PUPILS* go out carrying  
*the litter. Some play a mournful*  
*music.*